2002-VideoTribute to Dowson

Additional Commentaries to the video:

2002-Part2, p.1:	Additional written contributions: Ken Hiebert, Vancouver
2002-Part2, p.2	Diane Mossman, Dick Prinsep contributions
2002-Part2, p.3	Abraham Weizfeld, Montreal testimonial
2002-Part2, p.4	Letter to *IV*, from John Glenn & John Darling, Forward Group
2002-Part2, p.5	Announcement of Dowson anthology project ty John Darling
2002-Part2, p.6	Commentary by John Darling
2002-Part2, p.7	(continued) "…Newfoundland…"
2002-Part2, p.8	(end) Thanks to the video producer reSolutions of Toronto

(See the major portion of Commentaries on the Forward Group tribute videos Part 1 and Part 2 filmed on the Ryerson campus in 2003.)

Ross Dowson Memorial Video Presentation

June 8, 2002 — Oakham House, Ryerson Campus, Toronto

Additional written contributions

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Ken Hiebert letter from Vancouver

The name Ross Dowson will be known to few readers of *New Socialist*. In 1989, after more than fifty years of political activity, he was immobilized by a stroke. But to an earlier generation he loomed large. And the stories I can tell about him I got second hand from others who had been influenced by him.

Somewhere 1 have a picture of Ross at the age of eighteen, in High Park, Toronto, with a group of young Trotskyists. Within a few years he had emerged as a central activist in the group. And he was determined to overcome whatever obstacles he met.

During World War II, when the group was prevented from publishing a newspaper, Ross would print leaflets, go to the top of a high building, and fling them into the street. At the end of the war, he traveled west to pull together the forces that had been dispersed by wartime repression. A city boy, he found himself in some remote corner of the prairies, looking for human habitation.

In 1948 Ross ran for mayor of Toronto, winning about 30,000 votes (20% of the vote). This is not totally surprising when you remember that this was a time of intense union struggles. When Ross went to the editor of the *Toronto Star* to complain about the *Star*'s blackout of his campaign he was told, "Dowson, nothing you do is news."

In 1956 the Communist Party of Canada was thrown into turmoil by Khrushchev's (the premier of the Soviet Union) denunciation of Stalin. Ross went to a large CP meeting and challenged the party leader, Tim Buck, to a public debate. Buck accepted the challenge, but later backed away.

It would take an act of imagination, maybe a novel or a movie, to recreate a time when those who opposed capitalism were regarded by many as dangerous and evil. And among those who opposed capitalism, the minority who rejected Stalinism were reviled as "Trotskyites."

Ross's confidence in his ideas and his willingness to boldly proclaim them made him the ideal person to keep a small isolated group turned outward, not retreating into a comfortable small circle. In my experience it sometimes made conversations with him seem like a dialogue with a steamroller. And I remember with a smile the convoluted sentences he wrote as he struggled to fit the full Trotskyist analysis into a small newspaper.

I believe the anti-capitalist movement of today would be weaker and smaller without the decades of work that Ross contributed. And those who remember Ross fondly must thank his sister, Lois Bedard, for her years of care.

Diane Mossman written comment at Memorial

This is one of my enduring memories of Ross - in late 60s, early 70s. Kim Boyd and I were seriously considering having a child -- but we were both serious activists and struggled with whether it was *appropriate,* given our commitment to the revolutionary movement and the possibility of growing social conflict, to bring a child into the world. We decided to ask the wisest person we knew how he felt about two comrades having a child. His response -- words to this effect -- said with a big smile: "We want our comrades to be part of the *real* world, to engage in all aspects of life -- not to be *isolated* from working people (who usually have kids! he said); that the LSA *needed* kids to be more rounded a movement. "I think it's a wonderful idea!" — and so we did. Sean Mossman Boyd was born July 31, 1971 and the first announcement of his birth was by phone to Camp Poundmaker! Kim and I always thanked Ross in helping us make that major decision in our lives!

And thank you for the video - it is a beautiful as well as educational tribute to Ross.

Dick Prinsep letter from Vancouver

Ross Dowson has passed away, 84 years of age. All his life he was possessed with an idea. That idea was that all people -- the world over -- have the right to a life of material and creative abundance. Regardless of social origin, gender or status.

He knew an outmoded corrosive corrupt system called capitalism was the big obstacle to this realization. And all his life he dedicated and sacrificed for the removal of this obstacle. Yes, he was a Marxist materialist who believed that humanity led by a principled vanguard could raise itself to high levels by its own bootstraps. There was no god or deity from up on high who would do this for them.

He fought for humanist socialism. Not the caricature that now (or did) exist in some countries with bureaucratic aberrations which can be characterized as "Stalinism." After that bloody despot (Stalin, who usurped the mantle of Lenin and Trotsky and perverted the ideas of Marx, Engels, Luxemburg and Gramsci), the odds for the creation of a genuine workers' state were bleak.

Ross dismissed the claims of the bureaucracy that socialism could be built in only one country, or that "socialist man or woman" could be realized in such circumstances. He said that as long as capitalism existed as the dominant world force there could be no such thing as a "socialist man or woman."

So he battened down and strove for international socialism -- this was the only way. It would be a long and difficult fight with many a defeat along the road -- but eventual victory.

Ross was not perfect. He had his faults (but then what human being doesn't especially when you live in a society which puts profit above all else and perpetuates massive inequality -- fabulous wealth for the few and crumbs for the rest?) For the last 12 or so years of his life he struggled against a crippling paralysis and confined him to a wheelchair and then a bed.

Now he is gone but others will take up the torch and soon this dysfunctional system we exist under will be looked upon as a brief blotch on the ascent of humanity to its ultimate destiny.

eibie (Abraham) Weizfeld letter from Montreal

Testimonial on behalf of Ross Dowson

The organizer and revolutionary-theoretician Ross Dowson worked for the Canadian revolutionary movement during his entire conscious adult life to the great benefit of the Canadian workers and society at large, in addition to his contributions in political theory to the International *(a reference to his posing the example of the Canadian movement's development of unconditional but critical support for the mass labor party while building an independent revolutionary movement -- Web Ed.).*

This I know as a participant and student of his since the late sixties when I first met the League for Socialist Action and first of all the Young Socialists, which was a revolutionary youth movement at the time. In spite of the small numbers in members in comparison to the established Communist Party and other leftist formations it was well known that the Trotskyists were largely more effective in their political work. In general each LSAer or YSer was considered equal to two of any other organization due primarily to the energy of each member who was motivated by a clarity of political vision that was generated first of all by Ross Dowson. The prescience of Ross was only typical of his daily work which exceeded the energy level of anyone else and no doubt contributed to his neural failure. Nonetheless his advice and political clarity contributed to educate layers upon layers of activists and movement builders.

During the time that I knew him he contributed to the political programme of the leftist movements in terms of developing an organizational strategy which took into consideration the political consciousness of the Canadian workers and the existing political formations which had grown out of that diverse working class. The revolutionary orientation to the labor party organization, the New Democratic Party, was a cornerstone of the dissemination of revolutionary socialist thought into the working class as a whole. The heritage is evident today in the various left-wing caucuses of the NDP in Canada and especially in the Quebec united left movement which is about to launch its electoral formation, the Union des Forces Progressistes (UFP - United Progressive Forces) in Montreal this June 15-16th. This formation arose out of the efforts of the former Quebec NDP which transformed itself into the Parti démocratique socialiste (PDS) with the influence of the internal recognized faction of the Gauche Socialiste, a Trotskyist tendency which had an experience with the LSA. This organizational strategy demonstrated his flexibility of mind which went beyond the Leninist party paradigm to encompass the necessary foundations for a non-sectarian revolutionary movement.

In terms of the political economy of Canada, Ross also contributed an immense effort intellectually during the internal discussion of the 70s which elaborated a theory of Canadian dependency enveloped by U.S. imperialism. Nowadays this tendency of thought is carried by at least two of the leading contenders for the leadership of the NDP.

One could go on and on about Ross's contributions but we know that any single effort comes to an end one day and we can only salute his immense contributions and provide his memory with the acknowledgement that we carry his contributions on to even greater results.

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Letter to *International Viewpoint (journal of the Fourth International)***,** from John Glenn & John Darling, Forward Group, Toronto

Comrades:

In a recent obituary in *International Viewpoint* (May 2002, No. 340) of Canadian Ross Dowson, the writer claimed that his supporters left the old League for Socialist Action (LSA) over the question of Canadian nationalism. The cause of our departure was, in reality, the LSA's changes in our historic strategic orientation towards the New Democratic Party, Canada's labor party. Never was our position one of "entirely" orienting to the NDP. The NDP was the center of our orientation, but not always the area

of our activities. Hence there were campaigns around Cuba, Vietnam, civil rights and other projects. Even our tendency in the LSA was called the "Labor Party Tendency."

Nor did we deny Canada was an imperialist State, but we also recognized the growing influence of foreign alliances with Britain and the United States -- everything from NATO to the OAS *(the State Department vehicle, the Organization of American States --ed.)* The demonstrations from Seattle to Quebec City have resulted in activists and youth moving towards the NDP as was shown in last summer's NDP convention. Globalization, free trade and continentalism pushes these anti-imperialist positions forward. In the mid-1970s, Dowson tried to look further into the future, while your obituary writer remains stuck in the past.

In your obituary, your writer refers to Dowson and the Forward Group as a "cult around Dowson," even though we supported Ernest Mandel's fine critique of *(recent SWP leader Jack --ed.)* Barnes and the Socialist Workers Party. Will this writer begin to refer to us as "Dowsonites" in a similar fashion that Stalinists and liberals referred to Trotsky's supporters as "Trotskyites"? Then one would not have to examine positions because, well, they're just a "cult." What irony!

Announcement of a Ross Dowson anthology project, by John Darling

I'd like to say something about the importance of Ross's archives and plans for a Ross Dowson anthology. I would like to invite all of you present to participate in the work of further organizing Ross's archives and selecting Ross's writing and speeches for future publication. In fact, your purchase of this VHS or DVD of the memorial will go towards funding this project. If you would like to make a further donation or contribution, speak to myself or any member of the video cast.

The archives were born out of about 250 cardboard boxes stacked high in Lois Bedard's spare bedrooms over the years; they are now sorted and indexed. They will leave soon for National Archives in Ottawa, to be known as "The Ross Dowson fond" (alongside the existing "MacDonald-Spector fonds" which also include much of Ross Dowson's archives.

Anyone can refer to the contents of the Ross Dowson archives through the archive indexes, which also include the pamphlets and journals, and a selection of the books in Ross's extensive library. The journals, which are being assembled into bound volumes, are undergoing indexing where this work has not yet been done, for easy reference. Thousands of articles written by movement leaders and activists as well as by Ross on the vital political questions of the mid-twentieth century will now be accessible.

We hope you will support this important venture.

To obtain a VHS or DVD of the Memorial, or to make a donation or assist with the Ross Dowson anthology project, please contract the writer at 416-928-3086.

Text of commentary following video presentation By John Darling

After Harry had written a draft of this script for the memorial video to Ross, Zane I think it was wrote in the margin on the part describing the formation of the Revolutionary Workers Party at the end of World War II "explain WHY, and HOW, RWP formed."

In the course of further researching the script, the depth and breadth of the post-war workers' upsurge was revealed -- an enormous strike wave which swept through all major industries in the Canadian economy, above all in auto, steel and mining. This upsurge, a direct result of workers sacrifices during four years of world war, became the final push to establish once and for all mass industrial unions in Canada *(more accurately, the strike wave was to defend the industrial unions so easily won to promote the war*

effort's immense profits -- Web ed.) The pre-revolutionary nature and potential of this strike wave was revealed to us - and this was the reason why the Revolutionary Workers Party was formed.

However, the post-war strike wave upsurge turned out to be short-lived, ironically in part because it's success was so rapid and decisive *(since cost-plus war profits were to be made rapidly with labor peace --Web Ed.)* Furthermore, this upsurge did not advance to become a political struggle mainly due to the stranglehold of the Canadian Communist Party on the left -- this thoroughly Stalinized party which had supported the war and advocated a no-strike pledge to boot! Any perspective for political struggle was thereby aborted, and the pre-revolutionary potential of the upsurge was quickly dissipated. However, it can be established that mass Canadian industrial unionism was truly born in the fires of this postwar pre-revolutionary upsurge. *(Contrast the bitter struggles won by the US industrial unions of the C.I.O. in the pre-war 1930s -- Web. Ed.)*

There was another major development that future historians will also seek to understand. That was the dynamics of the birth of the mass labor party, the New Democratic Party, fifteen years later (1961) in Canada. Again, it might be asked: "Show why, and how, the NDP was formed."

This video has sketched the main answer to that question: the 1950s bosses' campaign to smash the Canadian union movement, the cascading anti-labor legislation rammed through the legislatures of B.C. and Ontario, and outright union-smashing in Murdochville, Quebec. The crescendo of this vicious attack against workers' economic power was in Newfoundland where the International Woodworkers Union was crushed in open and bitter class struggles by the Smallwood government.

In a fight for its life, the Canadian union movement was driven to transform the obsolete farmer-labor CCF into a direct political tool, simply to serve as a protective parliamentary device in the eyes of the union tops, in forming the New Democratic Party as a first line of defence against the State onslaught of the Canadian capitalist class and the rapidly growing influence of U.S. capital in boardrooms on Bay Street and backrooms in Ottawa.

But in so doing, the labor brass unwittingly also posed the question of labor power of the Canadian state. The formation of the NDP represents a partial mass labor mobilization, to whigh we Trotskyists with our lack of social-democratic grace insist labor go all the way, to win labor power in Ottawa! Have we not the example of the BLP in Britain, which had recently taken power in a sister parliament? As we know, this idea of labor to power with the NDP was Ross's favorite slogan, and the key to our transitional demands. The NDP became the first and only mass labor-based party in North America, and one of the very few such parties in the world enjoying national hegemony over the labor movement -- certainly unique in North America.

In our video, we provide a quote from Ross in which he describes the birth of the NDP as "the most important development in Canadian labor history, more important even than the CIO" because the founding of this party generalized labor struggles to the level of a direct challenge by labor for control of the State, the first vital step of any national working class in modern industrial countries.

In a real sense the NDP also was born of the class struggle, a life-and-death struggle for survival of its primary economic tool, the union movement. Only we Trotskyists possess the class analysis of this dynamic, the class struggle analysis which explains the very existence of unions and the indispensable transitional role of the New Democratic Party. We can say that we "own a piece of the NDP" just as we "own a piece of the unions" because we alone as a political tendency understand the social significance of these workers organs. Broadbent and the social-democrats are the caretaker leadership, the deadweight sitting astride the party, dampening its potential with their obsolete ideology -- which today dares not even whisper the word "socialism."

So why, the question should be asked, why would we revolutionaries place any "conditions" on our support of the mass labor party in Canada? — that party which we

understand as the vehicle of labor's political evolution toward State power, the dual power regime in which a revolutionary socialist party would then pose the logical next step of a soviet socialist Canada. We think that the future of Canadian socialism depends on our being able to put this perspective before the next generation of revolutionists and workers' leaders. This video on Ross's life and politics charts that course. That is the value of his heritage, remaining an indelible part of our revolutionary culture.

(end of written commentaries)

The Forward Group wishes to acknowledge the full cooperation, creative technical assistance and music provided by Resolutions Inc. of Toronto in the 2003 production "Ross Dowson, Canadian Revolutionary 1917-2002"